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## A WEST AFRICAN CAVALRY STATE: THE KINGDOM OF OYO

BY ROBIN LAW

THE thesis that horses played a crucial role in West African history has long been widely accepted, and has been refined and elaborated in a recent book by Jack Goody.<sup>1</sup> However, Humphrey Fisher, in a recent study of the role of the horse in the societies of the Central Sudan, published in this *Journal*, has challenged a number of the conventional assumptions about the importance of horses in pre-colonial West Africa.<sup>2</sup> The present article is offered as a further contribution to discussion of some of the issues raised by Goody and Fisher. It deals with another of the horse-using areas of West Africa, the Yoruba kingdom of Oyo, in south-western Nigeria. The case of Oyo provides a useful complement to Fisher's study of the Central Sudan, for whereas the Central Sudan is a horse-breeding as well as a horse-using area, Oyo, situated further south and in an environment less congenial to horses, was almost entirely dependent for its horses upon importation from the countries to the north.

The present article is limited in scope to a consideration of the military role of horses in Oyo. It is as well, therefore, to begin by recalling Fisher's salutary warning that horses in West Africa served as a form of conspicuous consumption as well as, and perhaps more than, being employed in warfare. In Oyo, as in the Central Sudan, horses were frequently kept as a tangible token of status by the rich and powerful: indeed, since horses were scarcer in Oyo, their value as a status symbol was perhaps greater.<sup>3</sup> The horsemen of Oyo rode in festivals as well as on battlefields,<sup>4</sup> and the sacrifice of horses graced the great state ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> (At a royal funeral, for good measure, the bridle-holder of the king's horse was also obliged to commit suicide.<sup>6</sup>) It is no part of my intention to deny the importance of these non-military functions of the horse, which are central to an understanding of its role in West Africa. Horses, indeed, frequently turn up serving purposes of prestige and ritual even in societies which never made

<sup>1</sup> J. Goody, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa* (London, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> H. J. Fisher, "'He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage': The horse in the Central Sudan", 2 parts, *J. Afr. Hist.* xiii, 3 (1972), 369-88, and xiv, 3 (1973), 355-79.

<sup>3</sup> The equation of horses with status, and with arrogance, is clear in a number of Yoruba proverbs. For example, *a kù í kù 'Yàgò' fun elesin àndá*, we do not say 'Make way' for a man who rode a horse yesterday; *enì gun esin, ilè l'ó òhò*, one who mounts a horse has to come down. See J. O. Ajibola, *Owe Yoruba* (2nd ed. Ibadan, 1971), nos 130, 434.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (London, 1921), 50.

<sup>5</sup> For examples, see Johnson, *History*, 44, 45, 55. Johnson suggests that the sacrifice of horses in Oyo was a recent development, replacing earlier human sacrifices.

<sup>6</sup> L. Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa* (trans. R. Blind, London, 1913), I, 183. This official, the Olokun Esin, was a senior palace slave.

use of cavalry. In the coastal kingdoms of Dahomey and Benin, for example, the rulers and their principal chiefs kept horses to ride on formal occasions, although they knew so little of horsemanship that they had to be held in their seats by attendants walking on either side of the horses.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, horses were imported into Igbo country in order to be sacrificed in title-taking and funeral ceremonies.<sup>8</sup> However, fascination with these non-utilitarian aspects of horse-keeping should not lead us to neglect the concrete contribution which some West African horses did make to the winning of battles, and it may be suggested that the importance of horses in 'conspicuous consumption' is only comprehensible as a secondary phenomenon, deriving ultimately from their role in warfare.

### *The introduction of horses*

Horses must originally have been introduced into the Yoruba area from the countries to the north,<sup>9</sup> but the date and circumstances of their introduction are uncertain. According to a common view the diffusion of horses in West Africa was effected by a series of migrations of horse-using peoples, who were able to conquer the indigenous populations and establish large states precisely because of their possession of horses. Fisher has criticized this theory with regard to Kanem and Hausaland. In the case of Yorubaland, Fage has suggested that the earliest Yoruba states were founded, perhaps around the twelfth century, by 'invading horsemen from Borgu and Nupe', the immediate northern neighbours of Oyo.<sup>10</sup> Fisher, on the other hand, cites Oyo as one of a group of states to the south of the Central Sudan whose traditions of horse-keeping were, he argues, ancient and independent of recent northern influence.<sup>11</sup> It is argued here that neither of these views is tenable: the horses of Oyo do represent a recent borrowing from the Central Sudan, but their association with immigrant conquerors is questionable, and they have nothing to do with the origins of states in Yorubaland.

There is no reason to suppose that horses have any relevance to the question of the emergence of the earliest Yoruba states. Ife, according to tradition the earliest Yoruba kingdom, is situated in forest country unsuitable to cavalry, and the numerous brass and terracotta sculptures

<sup>7</sup> For this practice in Benin, see P. de Marees, *Beschryvinghe ende Historische Verhael van het Gout Koninckrijk van Gunea* (ed. S. P. L'Honoré Naber, The Hague, 1912), 239. For Dahomey, see, e.g. G. A. Robertson, *Notes on Africa* (London, 1819), 265; J. Duncan, *Travels in Western Africa* (London 1847), I, 119, 222–3, 230, 301–2.

<sup>8</sup> A. E. Afigbo, 'Trade and Trade-Routes in Nineteenth Century Nsukka', *J. Hist. Soc. Nigeria*, VII (1973), 81–2.

<sup>9</sup> The northern origin of Yoruba equestrianism is illustrated by the northern derivation of a number of items in Yoruba equine vocabulary: for example, *kùurú* (pony), *àlùkémù* (stirrups), and *kóbítá* (riding boots fitted with spurs), from Hausa *kuru*, *likafa*, and *kubutai*.

<sup>10</sup> J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa* (Cambridge, 1969), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part 1, 375. But note the reservations expressed, *ibid.* 377–8.

excavated at Ife do not include any representation of a horse.<sup>12</sup> A slightly better case can be made out for linking horses with the foundation of Oyo itself. Oranmiyan, the Ife prince who is said to have founded the royal dynasties of both Oyo and Benin, is traditionally associated with horses. Benin tradition, indeed, maintains that the first horse in Benin was brought by Oranmiyan.<sup>13</sup> Oyo tradition is less specific: Oranmiyan is given a horse, but no special emphasis is laid upon this.<sup>14</sup> In Oyo tradition, the equestrian associations of Sango, supposedly a son of Oranmiyan and the third ruler of Oyo, are much stronger: wooden sculptures of horsemen are commonly carved for the cult of Sango.<sup>15</sup> However, it would be unwise to make even Sango the basis of an argument for the early existence of horses in Oyo. According to Frobenius, the carving of equestrian statues for Sango was not an original feature of the cult, but was introduced when the original royal dynasty of Oyo was displaced by a new dynasty from Borgu.<sup>16</sup>

Other evidence suggests that the use of cavalry by the Oyo may have begun only during the sixteenth century, although horses may well have been known and used for non-military purposes earlier. The earliest instance of the use of cavalry recorded in Oyo tradition comes from the reign of Orompoto, the tenth ruler of Oyo, which probably fell in the latter half of the sixteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Modern scholars seem content to accept this tradition as approximately dating the beginning of the use of cavalry by Oyo.<sup>18</sup> Earlier in the sixteenth century, Oyo had been subjected in dramatic fashion to the influence of its northern neighbours: the kingdom is said to have been overrun by invaders from Nupe, causing its royal dynasty to seek temporary refuge in Borgu.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that horses were in use in Nupe and Borgu by the beginning of the sixteenth century,<sup>20</sup> and

<sup>12</sup> However, the terracotta sculptures excavated at Owo, in eastern Yorubaland, in 1971 by Ekpo Eyo, do include fragments of a sculpture of a horse: Ekpo Eyo, personal communication. These sculptures may date to about the fifteenth century: cf. C. Flight, 'A survey of recent results in the radiocarbon chronology of Northern and Western Africa', *J. Afr. Hist.* xiv, 4 (1973), 549.

<sup>13</sup> J. U. Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin* (3rd ed, Ibadan, 1960), 8.

<sup>14</sup> For example, one traditional explanation of the name Oyo is that the site was selected for settlement because Oranmiyan's horse slipped (yò) there: cf. R. Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (London, 1969), 33.

<sup>15</sup> An example is illustrated in F. Willett, *African Art* (London, 1971), 107, ill. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Frobenius, *Voice of Africa*, I, 210-12, II, 629.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *History*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> J. F. A. Ajayi and R. Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (2nd ed, Cambridge, 1971), 3-4; Smith, *Kingdoms*, 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> For these events, see R. Smith, 'The Alafin in Exile: A Study of the Igboho Period in Oyo History', *J. Afr. Hist.* vi, (1965), 57-77.

<sup>20</sup> The 'Kano Chronicle', in H. R. Palmer, *Sudanese Memoirs* (Lagos, 1928), III, 111, indicates that the Nupe had begun to import horses from Hausaland by the fifteenth century. Tsoede, the creator of the unified Nupe kingdom in the sixteenth century, is said to have had no less than 5,555 horses: S. F. Nadel, *A Black Byzantium: The Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria* (London, 1942), 74. The introduction of horses into Borgu is less easy to date. It is associated by tradition with the migration of Kisra, the dynastic ancestor, from Bornu: H. B. Hermon-Hodge, *Gazetteer of Ilorin Province* (London, 1929), 119.

these events may well have led the Oyo to adopt the use of cavalry from their neighbours. If Frobenius's story of the usurpation of power in Oyo by an equestrian dynasty from Borgu has any basis in fact, the change of dynasty probably belongs to this period: the tradition that the royal family of Oyo retired into Borgu and subsequently returned to reclaim power is certainly suspicious, being precisely the sort of story which might be fabricated in order to legitimize the arrival of a foreign dynasty.<sup>21</sup>

All this, it must be admitted, is highly speculative. What is certain is that Oyo was already using cavalry when it came within the notice of the European traders at the coast in the eighteenth century. Even the European evidence, indeed, is not without ambiguity. For example, Bosman records an invasion of the coastal kingdom of Allada by a force of cavalry in 1698. The invaders are usually identified with the Oyo, but since the main grounds for this identification are the invaders' use of cavalry, it would be circular to use Bosman as evidence for the use of cavalry by the Oyo.<sup>22</sup> For completely unequivocal evidence of the existence of cavalry forces in Oyo, we have to wait until Snelgrave's account of the Oyo wars against Dahomey in the 1720s.<sup>23</sup> Thereafter, various European references attest the use of cavalry by Oyo until the early nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

### *The acquisition, maintenance and equipment of horses*

The Oyo kingdom never became self-sufficient in horses. Local breeding of horses in the Oyo area is inhibited by the prevalence of the tsetse fly, the vector of trypanosomiasis. There are tsetse-free areas in the north of the Oyo kingdom, and there are records of mares foaling in northern Oyo towns in the present century, but it is clear that local breeding was haphazard and was never developed on a commercial scale. The vast majority of the horses used in Oyo were imported from the north. The trade is said to have been in the hands of Hausa merchants,<sup>25</sup> and Ogodo, a market town on the frontier with Nupe, is said to have been the site of the principal horse-fair from which the Oyo obtained their mounts.<sup>26</sup> Horses were also

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (trans. H. M. Wright, London, 1965), 74.

<sup>22</sup> W. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1705), 397.

<sup>23</sup> W. Snelgrave, *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea* (London, 1734), 55–8, 121–2.

<sup>24</sup> See esp. J. Adams, *Remarks on the Country extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London, 1823), 92; Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 208. Cf. the tall story reported by Pruneau de Pommegorge, *Description de la Nigritie* (Paris, 1789), 235–6, that the Oyo put their war captives to death by dragging them from the tails of their horses.

<sup>25</sup> Oral evidence on horses in Oyo was collected during fieldwork in 1973, the writer's principal informants being senior palace officials, notably the Kudufu and the Olokun Esin. Financial support for this fieldwork was provided by the British Academy, the Sir Ernest Cassel Educational Trust, and the University of Stirling.

<sup>26</sup> R. Smith, personal communication. See also Smith, *Kingdoms*, 204. For the commercial importance of Ogodo, cf. Johnson, *History*, 217.

occasionally imported into the Yoruba area by sea, by European traders, but apparently never in significant numbers.<sup>27</sup>

European observers frequently describe the horses of Oyo as 'small'.<sup>28</sup> Robertson, who saw Oyo horses at the coast in the early nineteenth century, compares them to Welsh ponies, and observes that the largest of them were only of thirteen or fourteen hands in height.<sup>29</sup> These general statements obscure the fact that apparently there were distinct breeds of smaller and larger horses, although even the larger breed was small by European standards. Snelgrave draws a sharp distinction between the inferior horses, 'but little bigger than our Asses', which could be obtained at the coast, and the horses used by the Oyo cavalry, 'each about thirteen hands high'.<sup>30</sup> Later European travellers in Borgu and Nupe similarly speak of a breed of 'ponies' and a breed of larger horses, and add that the ponies were indigenous to the area while the larger horses were imported from Bornu.<sup>31</sup> Horses of the smaller breed would hardly have been suitable for use as cavalry mounts, and it may be presumed that the Oyo cavalry regularly used the larger Bornu horses.

Horses in Oyo were never put out to graze in fields, but were kept tethered in the open courtyards of their owners' compounds in the towns. Their food (grass and guinea-corn) had therefore to be brought to them from the outlying farms, this work being normally done by slaves. Slaves of northern origin, mainly Hausa and Nupe, were often employed to look after horses, since they were more familiar with horses than the local people.<sup>32</sup>

Keeping horses alive in Oyo was a matter of some difficulty, owing to the threat of the tsetse fly. Robertson observed that horses brought from Oyo to the coast tended to die quickly, and speculated that this was due to 'the grass near the coast being, from its rapid growth, extremely acid'.<sup>33</sup> It is much more likely that these horses were dying from trypanosomiasis.

<sup>27</sup> Europeans occasionally brought horses as gifts or in trade to Benin: A. F. C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897* (London, 1969), 41, 85-6. For Yorubaland, evidence of the importation of horses from the coast is lacking until the mid-nineteenth century: T. J. Bowen, *Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labours* (Charleston, 1857), 263. Earlier, we hear rather of European traders *purchasing* horses from the interior, for use at the coast: Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 389; Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 207-8.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Adams, *Remarks*, 186; H. Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa* (London, 1829), 56. The horses of Benin, Whydah and Dahomey (probably imports from Oyo) are similarly described as 'small': de Marees, *Beschryvinghe*, 239; J. Barbot, 'Description des Côtes d'Afrique' (unpublished manuscript of 1688, in Ministry of Defence Navy Library, London, ms. 63), IIIème Partie, 133; J. McLeod, *A Voyage to Africa* (London 1820), 29.

<sup>29</sup> Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 208, 284-5.

<sup>30</sup> Snelgrave, *New Account*, 26, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Clapperton, *Journal*, 73, 93; R. Lander, *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition to Africa* (London 1830), I, 140, II, 13. For the Bornu breed of horses, cf. Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part I, 381 and n. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Oral evidence; cf. J. B. Webster and A. A. Boahen, *The Revolutionary Years: West Africa since 1800* (London, 1967), 73; J. F. A. Ajayi, 'The aftermath of the fall of Old Oyo', in J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, II (London, 1974), 143.

<sup>33</sup> Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 208.



The danger of infection was especially great during the rainy season, when the tsetse flies dispersed more widely over the countryside. This danger is no doubt the reason for the reluctance of the Oyo cavalry to campaign during the rains, noted by Snelgrave.<sup>34</sup> Contact with tsetse was minimized by the practice of keeping horses stabled in the towns, and horses were washed down with a fly-repellent liquid.<sup>35</sup> However, the risk of infection remained considerable, and it has been suggested that horses kept in Oyo seldom survived for more than about two years.<sup>36</sup>

Fisher has drawn attention to the importance of equipment for the effective use of horses in warfare.<sup>37</sup> In Yorubaland, bits, saddles and stirrups of types clearly derived from the Central Sudan were commonly used.<sup>38</sup> Originally, these items of equipment must have been imported into Oyo from the north, and this trade still continued on some scale in the nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup> By then, however, bits, saddles and stirrups were also being manufactured locally.<sup>40</sup>

Although saddles and stirrups were known in Oyo, they were not in universal use. Robertson reports of the Oyo that 'they generally ride without saddles, having merely a piece of scarlet, or other coloured woollen cloth, which they use instead'.<sup>41</sup> This statement is probably too sweeping, for there is other evidence that Oyo horsemen did use saddles,<sup>42</sup> but we can accept that a significant part of the Oyo cavalry fought without saddles or stirrups. It does not follow, however, that they were militarily ineffective. Cavalry could be employed in battle in two distinct ways. First, the superior mobility afforded by horses could be utilized in harrying tactics, the cavalry remaining at a distance from the enemy and using missile weapons such as bows and arrows and javelins—in West Africa, normally javelins.<sup>43</sup> For these tactics, saddles and stirrups were largely irrelevant. Second, cavalry might employ shock tactics, charging straight at the enemy and fighting at close quarters with spears or swords. In this case, saddles and stirrups might seem essential, in order to secure the riders firmly in their seats. However, cavalry lacking saddles and stirrups

<sup>34</sup> Snelgrave, *New Account*, 121–2.

<sup>35</sup> The Oyo used for this purpose soap mixed with scrapings from the roots of the violet tree (*ipèta*): oral evidence. In Northern Nigeria, a mixture containing tobacco was used: F. de F. Daniel, 'The Horse in Native Hands', *The Nigerian Field*, v (1936), no. 2, 56.

<sup>36</sup> Webster and Boahen, *West Africa since 1800*, 92. Oral evidence given to the present writer does not suggest that mortality was quite as severe as this.

<sup>37</sup> Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part II, 357–60, 378.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. R. Smith, 'Yoruba Armament', *J. Afr. Hist.* VIII, 1 (1967), 101–3.

<sup>39</sup> R. Lander, *Records*, II, 153, alludes to the importation into Oyo of iron bits and stirrups from Nupe; R. Lander and J. Lander, *Journal of an Expedition to Explore the Course and Termination of the Niger* (London, 1832), I, 172, refer to a saddle of Hausa manufacture.

<sup>40</sup> Oral evidence.

<sup>41</sup> Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 282.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Clapperton, *Journal*, 2, 34.

<sup>43</sup> Despite the examples of the Turks and the Mamluks, mounted archers were rarely employed in West Africa. Cf. H. Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (centenary ed., London, 1965), I, 581: 'An archer on horseback is an unheard of thing, not only in Bornu, but in almost all Negroland, except with the [nomadic] Fulbe, but even among them it is rare.'

have fought successfully in this way, an early example being the cavalry of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.<sup>44</sup> It has been persuasively argued that the use of stirrups was essential for the development, in Europe from the eighth century A.D., of a new form of shock tactics, in which the lance was held at rest between the rider's upper arm and body instead of being wielded at arm's length, so that the blow was delivered by the momentum of the charging horse rather than by the force of the rider's arm.<sup>45</sup> But these new tactics seem never to have been adopted in West Africa.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to their deficiencies in tack, the Oyo cavalymen do not seem to have made as much use of defensive armour as those of the Central Sudan. Shirts of chain mail were occasionally imported into Yorubaland from the north,<sup>47</sup> and these may have been worn by Oyo cavalymen. It does not appear, however, that the Oyo ever used the horse-armour of quilted cloth common in the Central Sudan, and known in Hausa as *lifidi*.<sup>48</sup>

### *The military value of cavalry*

Historians of West Africa have commonly supposed that possession of cavalry constituted a decisive military advantage, and the power of the Oyo kingdom during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been regularly attributed to its use of cavalry.<sup>49</sup> Fisher, however, has questioned this conventional belief in the military value of cavalry, and has suggested that horses were primarily useful in pursuit of fugitives after victory or in flight after defeat rather than in deciding the issue of the battle itself.<sup>50</sup> The case of Oyo would appear to support the view that cavalry could also be decisive in securing victory, although it equally illustrates some important limitations to the value of cavalry.

It is, unfortunately, far from easy to establish the precise role which cavalry forces played in the campaigns of the Oyo. Snelgrave, in his account of the Oyo invasions of Dahomey in the 1720s, reports that the Oyo army consisted entirely of cavalry.<sup>51</sup> This is a surprising assertion, since in West Africa cavalry normally operated in conjunction with infantry,

<sup>44</sup> See the lucid account of the confrontation between Alexander's cavalry, armed with thrusting-spears, and the Persian cavalry, armed with javelins, at the battle of the Granicus in 334 B.C., in Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri*, I, 15.

<sup>45</sup> L. White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford, 1962), chapter 1.

<sup>46</sup> As pointed out by Goody, *Technology*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* (London, 1894), 173; cf. R. Smith, 'A Note on Two Shirts of Chain Mail from the Palace at Owo in South-western Nigeria', *Odu*, new series, 5 (1971), 93-8.

<sup>48</sup> For *lifidi*, see D. J. M. Muffett, 'Nigeria—Sokoto Caliphate', in M. Crowder (ed.), *West African Resistance* (London, 1971), 278.

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g. Ajayi and Smith, *Yoruba Warfare*, 3-4; Smith, *Kingdoms*, 122-3; Webster and Boahen, *West Africa since 1800*, 92.

<sup>50</sup> Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part II, 357-66, 378.

<sup>51</sup> Snelgrave, *New Account*, 56, 121. The (Oyo?) army which invaded Allada in 1698 is similarly said to have been 'all Horsed': Bosman, *New and Accurate Description*, 397.



the infantry attacking first and the cavalry being committed only after the infantry had disordered the enemy's ranks.<sup>52</sup> To this anomaly Snelgrave adds another, when he describes the Oyo cavalry as 'armed with Bows and Arrows, Javelins, and Cutting Swords'.<sup>53</sup> Mounted archers were extremely uncommon in West Africa,<sup>54</sup> and other evidence shows that in Oyo as elsewhere the cavalry were normally armed with spears and swords, while the archers went on foot.<sup>55</sup> However, on this point Snelgrave is supported by Robertson, who reports that both cavalry and infantry in Oyo used bows and arrows.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the solution to these problems is that for campaigns in remote areas such as Dahomey, the Oyo archers were mounted for greater mobility on the march, but fought on foot.<sup>57</sup> The Oyo cavalry were probably employed in both harrying and shock tactics: certainly, they might be armed with either javelins or thrusting-spears.<sup>58</sup>

Clapperton, who visited Oyo in 1826, was very unfavourably impressed with the Oyo cavalry. He commented scathingly:

the horsemen are but ill mounted; the animals are small and badly-dressed, their saddles so ill-secured, and the rider sits so clumsily on his seat, that any Englishman, who ever rode a horse with an English saddle, would upset one of them the first charge with a long stick.<sup>59</sup>

Whether or not these strictures were justified, they are really irrelevant to an assessment of the military value of Oyo cavalry: the Oyo did not have to fight against European cavalry, and in any case by the 1820s the power of Oyo was in decline and the Oyo cavalry was very much past its best. Belief in the earlier efficacy of Oyo cavalry rests, it must be admitted, largely upon vague assertions in traditions and contemporary sources. The only record of specific campaigns in which the Oyo cavalry fought successfully is Snelgrave's account of the Oyo invasions of Dahomey in 1726 and 1729. Later sources refer to the cavalry of Oyo only in general terms, and do not recount any specific campaigns to whose success the Oyo cavalry contributed.<sup>60</sup> Even Snelgrave's evidence is ambivalent, since his informant (a member of the Dahomian court) claimed that the Oyo invaders in 1726 had actually been beaten off after fierce fighting. However, a contemporary source reports the 1726 campaign as a victory for the

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part II, 362.

<sup>53</sup> Snelgrave, *New Account*, 56.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. above, n. 43.

<sup>55</sup> Clapperton, *Journal*, 34; R. Lander, *Records*, 1, 103; R. and J. Lander, *Journal*, 1, 154. Yoruba equestrian sculptures show horsemen armed with spears, swords, and pistols, but never with bows and arrows.

<sup>56</sup> Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 208.

<sup>57</sup> The use of horses as a means of transport to the battlefield rather than in battle is, however, difficult to parallel in West Africa: cf. Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part II, 361.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Smith, 'Yoruba Armament', 94–5. Snelgrave, *New Account*, 56, credits the Oyo cavalry with the use of javelins, but he also (ibid. 57) refers to shock tactics—'a home-Charge against the Enemies Foot'.

<sup>59</sup> Clapperton, *Journal*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Note also that the account of the Oyo invasions of Dahomey between 1739 and 1748 given by R. Norris, *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee, King of Dahomy* (London, 1789), 12–16, does not mention cavalry.

Oyo,<sup>61</sup> and Snelgrave himself records that after it the Dahomians sued for peace, 'an Army of Horse being very terrible to them'.<sup>62</sup> But if the campaign of 1726 can stand as an illustration of the military value of cavalry, the subsequent Oyo invasion of Dahomey in 1729 could equally be cited to demonstrate the limitations of cavalry. On this occasion, the Dahomians declined to offer battle, and withdrew into the bush. The Oyo devastated the country, but were eventually obliged to withdraw without a decisive victory, as Snelgrave explains, 'on account of the rainy Season that was approaching; and for want of Forage'.<sup>63</sup> The approach of the rains was probably feared, as suggested earlier, because it increased the danger of infection of horses with trypanosomiasis. Difficulties over forage were a common problem of cavalry armies.<sup>64</sup> In Oyo, it was customary for the slaves employed in the royal stables to accompany the army on long campaigns, to organize the collection of fodder for the horses.<sup>65</sup> The threat of tsetse and the difficulty of feeding horses on campaigns thus combined to restrict the operations of the Oyo cavalry to brief seasonal raids.

Snelgrave's account also illustrates a further limitation of cavalry, its inability to operate effectively except in suitable terrain. In Dahomey, as Snelgrave notes, cavalry could be used to advantage, because the country was 'open and without Inclosures'.<sup>66</sup> In wooded or hilly country, however, cavalry could not be deployed for a charge and was liable to ambush while moving along narrow paths. In the seventeenth century, the Oyo had attempted an invasion of Ijesaland, in eastern Yorubaland, a forested area: it is no surprise to learn that the invasion was decisively defeated, as we are told, 'the Oyos being then unaccustomed to bush fighting'.<sup>67</sup>

The value of cavalry was not restricted to its employment in open battle. Fisher has argued that mounted troops were especially useful in raiding for slaves.<sup>68</sup> Cavalry was doubtless employed in this role in Oyo, though evidence is lacking. The mobility of mounted troops also made them ideal for the defence of trading caravans. It is said that Oyo traders regularly travelled under the protection of cavalry forces,<sup>69</sup> and this appears to be corroborated by the contemporary testimony of Robertson.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Francisco Pereyra Mendes to Viceroy of Brazil, 22 May 1726 (Archivo Publico, Bahia: 20, doc. 61), quoted in P. Verger, *Flux et Reflux de la Traite des Nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia* (Paris, 1968), 144.

<sup>62</sup> Snelgrave, *New Account*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 122.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part II, 361. The problems of feeding horses in the field are also mentioned at several points in Ibn Fartuwa's account of the campaigns of Mai Idris Alooma of Bornu: e.g. 'The Kanem Wars', in Palmer, *Sudanese Memoirs*, I, 28, 40.

<sup>65</sup> Oral evidence.

<sup>66</sup> Snelgrave, *New Account*, 56.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *History*, 168. The use of cavalry is not explicitly mentioned in this account, but the assumption that cavalry were used makes best sense of the reference to 'bush fighting'.

<sup>68</sup> Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part II, 364-5.

<sup>69</sup> Oral evidence.

<sup>70</sup> Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 282, reports of the Oyo traders bringing slaves to the coast: 'As they are generally in fear of being attacked by the Dahomians, they travel in caravans, and frequently have from two to three hundred horses with them'. This is probably a reference to a cavalry escort, but since Robertson elsewhere (ibid. 207-8, 284) refers to Oyo traders bringing horses to the coast to sell this is not altogether certain.

*The economic consequences of cavalry*

The maintenance of a cavalry force clearly involved a substantial economic burden for the Oyo kingdom. As has been seen, horses had to be imported into Oyo from the north and, owing to the mortality from trypanosomiasis, had continually to be replaced by fresh imports.<sup>71</sup> The cost of importing horses was considerable. Robertson reports that horses from Oyo sold at the coast at between £10 and £15 each,<sup>72</sup> while Clapperton gives the price of a horse at Oyo itself as between 80,000 and 100,000 cowries, or \$40–50, roughly twice the price of a prime slave.<sup>73</sup> Later evidence suggests that these prices must relate to small horses: the larger Bornu horses were much more expensive, a horse of fifteen hands' height being equivalent in value to seven slaves.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, to the cost of importing horses has to be added that of importing items of tack such as saddles, stirrups, bits and bridles.

It is known that other societies on the southern fringes of the Sudan financed their acquisition of horses by exporting slaves to the north.<sup>75</sup> The exchange of slaves for horses was equally a feature of the trans-Saharan and Atlantic trades,<sup>76</sup> and it is tempting to posit a circular and self-perpetuating process whereby slaves were captured in order to purchase horses, which in turn facilitated the capture of further slaves.<sup>77</sup> This may well have been the pattern in Oyo during the sixteenth century. But in the seventeenth century Oyo began to send slaves to the coast for sale to European traders, and by the late eighteenth century, far from exporting slaves northwards, Oyo was importing large numbers of slaves from the north for re-sale at the coast.<sup>78</sup> During this period, clearly, there was no simple exchange of war captives for horses. It seems likely, however, that the importation of horses was paid for largely by the re-export northwards of European manufactured goods obtained at the coast in exchange for

<sup>71</sup> This problem of securing cavalry mounts was not, of course, peculiar to Oyo. It was also important, for example, in Samori's empire: see M. Legassick, 'Firearms, Horses and Samorian Army Organization 1870–98', *J. Afr. Hist.* vii, 1 (1966), 106–7. Parallels can also be found in the Indian sub-continent: cf. S. Digby, *War-Horse and Elephant in the Dehli Sultanate: A Study of Military Supplies* (Oxford, 1971), chapter 11.

<sup>72</sup> Robertson, *Notes on Africa*, 284.

<sup>73</sup> Clapperton, *Journal*, 59.

<sup>74</sup> A. Millson, 'The Yoruba Country, West Africa', *Proc. Roy. Geog. Soc.* xiii (1891), 578; cf. W. H. Clarke, *Travels and Discoveries in Yorubaland 1854–1858* (ed. J. A. Atanda, Ibadan, 1972), 229.

<sup>75</sup> For the cases of Kwararafa and Nupe, see the 'Kano Chronicle', in Palmer, *Sudanese Memoirs*, III, 107, 111.

<sup>76</sup> For the trans-Saharan trade, see, e.g. Leo Africanus, *Description de l'Afrique* (trans. A. Epaulard, Paris 1956), II, 480, 482; G. F. Lyon, *A Narrative of Travels in Northern Africa* (London, 1821), 115, 121, 154. The Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also sold horses for slaves in the Senegambia area: see, e.g. V. Fernandes, *Description de la Côte Occidentale d'Afrique* (trans. T. Monod, A. Texeira da Mota, and R. Mauny, Bissau, 1951), 21, 43; Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis* (trans. R. Mauny, Bissau, 1956), 47, 53, 59, 61, 73.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Fisher, 'He swalloweth the ground', part II, 365.

<sup>78</sup> For the sale of Hausa slaves at the coast by the Oyo, see esp. Adams, *Remarks*, 221–2.

slaves.<sup>79</sup> In this way, a close link between the horse trade and the slave trade was maintained, although the Oyo may have financed their purchase of horses as much from the profits of their position as middlemen between the coast and the interior as from the proceeds of their own slave-raids.

Discussion of the expense of horse-keeping in West Africa has tended to concentrate upon the capital cost of horses, equipment, and armour, but some consideration should also be given to the cost of maintaining horses after purchase. The feeding of horses did not, of course, involve heavy expenditure in the market, but rather the commitment of the labour of large numbers of slaves. It is noteworthy that informants in Oyo, when commenting upon the high cost of keeping horses, tend to stress less the purchase price of the horses than the number of slaves needed to cut grass for them.<sup>80</sup>

### *The political implications of cavalry*

It has long been recognized that the high cost of maintaining a cavalry army may have implications for the political organization of states whose power depends upon cavalry. In ancient Greece, Aristotle noted that cavalry states tended to be oligarchies,<sup>81</sup> while in medieval Europe, writers such as Lynn White have sought to connect the development of 'feudalism' with the dominance in contemporary warfare of heavy cavalry.<sup>82</sup> In the case of West Africa, Goody, following White, has argued that the use of cavalry was correlated with political decentralization, whereas the equipment of armies with firearms facilitated the development of royal autocracy.<sup>83</sup> The general argument is that, given the limited resources available to West African rulers, large forces of cavalry could only be raised through an estate of self-financing nobles, and that the nobles who provided the cavalry could also claim a share of political power. In detail, Goody relates the common system of 'circulating succession', by which the king was chosen in rotation from a number of segments of the royal lineage, to the need for a large princely estate to serve as cavalry. Goody cites Oyo as an example of a decentralized cavalry state, and a more detailed consideration of the relationship between the military and political organization of Oyo may contribute towards an assessment of his general argument.

<sup>79</sup> This is no more than a hypothesis. But it is known that Oyo purchased slaves from the north with re-exported European manufactures: cf. D. Denham and H. Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa* (London, 1826), Clapperton's Narrative, 42.

<sup>80</sup> Oral evidence. It was generally stated that one or two slaves were required for each horse, though one informant offered an extravagant estimate of ten slaves per horse.

<sup>81</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1289b, 1321a.

<sup>82</sup> White, *Medieval Technology*, chapter 1.

<sup>83</sup> Goody, *Technology*, chapter 3. Similar arguments about the political effects of cavalry and firearms are put forward by P. Morton-Williams, 'The influence of habitat and trade on the polities of Oyo and Ashanti', in M. Douglas and P. M. Kaberry (eds), *Man In Africa* (London, 1969), and by J. P. Smaldone, 'Firearms in the Central Sudan: A Revaluation', *J. Afr. Hist.* XIII (1972), 591-607.

During the eighteenth century the Oyo capital was disturbed by a protracted struggle for power between the king (the Alafin) and the principal non-royal chiefs (the Oyo Mesi), of whom the most important was the Basorun.<sup>84</sup> It is clear that the Alafin were unable to destroy the power of the Oyo Mesi, and it has been plausibly suggested that this ability of the Oyo Mesi to resist the establishment of a royal autocracy was a consequence of their control of the military forces, and in particular the cavalry forces, of the capital.<sup>85</sup> In so far as the military organization of Oyo can be reconstructed, it does appear that the balance of military power in the capital lay with the Oyo Mesi rather than with the Alafin. The Alafin did possess a bodyguard of mounted troops, drawn from among the palace slaves.<sup>86</sup> In the nineteenth century, indeed, the palace slaves provided a significant proportion of the total strength of the Oyo army, and command of the army was often exercised by a senior palace eunuch (the Osi Iwefa), but it appears that the military importance of the palace slaves had been much less in the eighteenth century.<sup>87</sup> In this earlier period, the main strength of the metropolitan army is said to have been provided by seventy war-chiefs called the Eso, and it was probably the Eso and their retainers who constituted the most important cavalry force in Oyo.<sup>88</sup> The Eso themselves were free men, but many of their retainers were slaves, and it seems likely that mounted troops were recruited especially from among slaves of northern origin, who possessed the requisite equestrian skills.<sup>89</sup> The Eso apparently came under the control of the Oyo Mesi, and in the eighteenth century it was normally the Basorun, the head of the Oyo Mesi, who commanded the Oyo army.<sup>90</sup> The military system of the Oyo capital thus reinforced the position of the Oyo Mesi *vis-à-vis* the Alafin. Eventually, in 1774, the Alafin sought to assert his control in the capital by calling in military assistance from the subordinate towns of the Oyo kingdom.<sup>91</sup> But in the long run, this involve-

<sup>84</sup> R. C. C. Law, 'The Constitutional Troubles of Oyo in the Eighteenth Century', *J. Afr. Hist.* xii (1971), 25-44.

<sup>85</sup> Morton-Williams, 'The influence of habitat and trade', 91, 96; Ajayi, 'The aftermath of the fall of Old Oyo', 139-140.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *History*, 62.

<sup>87</sup> For the military role of the Osi Iwefa, see Johnson, *History*, 59. The military importance of the Osi Iwefa dates back at least to the 1820s: cf. Clapperton, *Journal*, 52.

<sup>88</sup> For the Eso, see esp. Morton-Williams, 'The influence of habitat and trade', 91.

<sup>89</sup> The grounds for this suggestion are exiguous. Apart from ambiguous oral testimony, note that Clapperton, *Journal*, 2-3, refers to two mounted attendants of an Oyo war-chief who were Muslims from Bornu.

<sup>90</sup> For the subordination of the Eso to the Oyo Mesi, see Johnson, *History*, 73. For the military role of the Basorun: *ibid.* 159, 169, 174; A. Dalziel, *A History of Dahomy* (London, 1793), 175. J. Macrae Simpson, 'An Intelligence Report on the Oyo Division of the Oyo Province', 1938 (Rhodes House Library, Oxford: MSS Afr. s. 526), sections 54-5, states that only thirty of the Eso were subordinate to the Oyo Mesi, the other forty being under the palace eunuchs: this probably represents a nineteenth-century reorganization.

<sup>91</sup> The armed forces of the provincial towns were controlled by the Alafin rather than by the Oyo Mesi, their commander (the Are Ona Kakamfo) being an appointee of the Alafin and in status a palace slave: Johnson, *History*, 74.

ment of the provincial towns in the politics of the capital served to complicate rather than to resolve the struggle for power, and led ultimately to the outbreak of civil war in the kingdom in the 1790s.

It can be seen that Goody is in error in linking the system of 'circulating succession' which operated in Oyo with the need for a 'mass dynasty' to serve as cavalry, since in Oyo both the cavalry and the check to royal power came not from the royal lineage but from the non-royal chiefs, the Oyo Mesi and the Eso.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the case of Oyo supports the general argument about the independent power of military chiefs in cavalry states. It is less clear, however, that Goody provides a convincing explanation of why cavalry armies (unlike firearm armies) could not readily be brought under royal control. Goody observes that firearms were 'centralizable' because, unlike horses, they could be stored in a central arsenal under royal control and distributed only when required, and because they were imported from outside.<sup>93</sup> However, horses might equally be kept in a central stable between campaigns,<sup>94</sup> and in Oyo horses were always imports from outside. More generally, Goody stresses the high cost of acquiring horses, but it is questionable whether this can be seen as the crucial constraint on royal control of cavalry. In Oyo it appears that the Alafin provided horses not only for his own mounted slaves, but also for the independent war-chiefs, the Eso, although the latter could and did also purchase horses for themselves.<sup>95</sup> The Alafin evidently did not lack the resources to purchase large numbers of horses: it was rather the chiefs who required to be subsidized out of royal revenues. The fact that the Alafin distributed horses to his chiefs rather than using them to build up the strength of his own force of mounted slaves suggests that what he lacked was rather a sufficient number of slaves to maintain and feed large numbers of horses. It was perhaps a shortage of labour rather than a shortage of purchasing power which inhibited the centralization of cavalry.

### *The decline of cavalry in Oyo*

The civil wars which broke out in the Oyo kingdom in the 1790s effected the destruction of Oyo power. The important provincial town of Ilorin revolted, and in 1817 incited a rebellion of the Muslim elements in the kingdom, including pastoral Fulani and slaves of northern origin as well as local converts. In c. 1823 the Fulani seized power in Ilorin,

<sup>92</sup> Goody's argument is, however, valid for the other cavalry states which he discusses, Gonja and the Bariba kingdoms of Borgu.

<sup>93</sup> Goody, *Technology*, 52.

<sup>94</sup> The objection to this sort of physical centralization, whether of horses or of firearms, was that it inhibited training, and therefore impaired military efficiency: cf. G. White, 'Firearms in Africa: An Introduction', *J. Afr. Hist.* xii, 2 (1971), 178.

<sup>95</sup> Oral evidence. The supply of horses by the ruler to his chiefs is also recorded in some other West African states: Mahdi Adamu, 'A Hausa Government in Decline: Yawuri in the Nineteenth Century' (M.A. Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1968), 119, 128, 153; Muhammad Bello Alkali, 'A Hausa Community in Crisis: Kebbi in the Nineteenth Century' (M.A. Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, 1969), 103, 117.



which became an emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate, and in c. 1836 the Oyo were decisively defeated by the Fulani and the Oyo capital was evacuated. Although the Oyo kingdom was quickly reconstructed, with its capital at the modern site away to the south, it was never again as powerful as in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>96</sup>

The decline of Oyo power in the early nineteenth century was accompanied, and exacerbated, by a decline in the strength of the Oyo cavalry. According to Dahomian tradition, the Oyo army which was sent in an unsuccessful attempt to suppress the revolt of Dahomey in 1823 included a strong cavalry contingent: the Dahomians are said to have prevented its effective use by attacking the Oyo camp at night.<sup>97</sup> But this was probably the last occasion on which the Oyo made use of a substantial cavalry force. Oyo tradition records that in the battles against Ilorin in the 1820s and 1830s the Oyo were at a great disadvantage because their enemies possessed cavalry, while the Oyo evidently did not.<sup>98</sup> This is corroborated by the contemporary evidence of Clapperton and the Landers. Clapperton in 1826 found that the Oyo were afraid of the Fulani of Ilorin because 'they have a great number of horses', while in the Oyo kingdom horses were 'scarce'.<sup>99</sup> The Landers in 1830 similarly heard that Ilorin possessed 'upwards of three thousand horses', while the Oyo capital did not have 'as many hundreds'.<sup>100</sup> When the Oyo kingdom was reconstructed after the collapse of the 1830s its armies were equipped with firearms, and no longer included any large number of mounted troops.<sup>101</sup>

The reasons for the eclipse of cavalry in Oyo are a matter of speculation. It has been suggested that the revolt of the slaves of northern origin in the kingdom in 1817 deprived the Oyo of their supplies of skilled grooms.<sup>102</sup> This is likely enough: indeed, the revolt may have involved cavalymen as well as grooms, since at least some of the mounted retainers of the Oyo war-chiefs were northerners. However, it is clear that the Oyo in the 1820s lacked not only grooms and skilled riders, but also horses. Evidently the importation of horses from the north had been drastically reduced in scale. It is commonly supposed that this was due to an embargo imposed, for military reasons, by hostile northern neighbours of Oyo.<sup>103</sup> This again is likely enough, but it can equally be argued that the failure of horse imports into Oyo was due to economic factors. It appears that the civil

<sup>96</sup> For these events, see Smith, *Kingdoms*, chapter x.

<sup>97</sup> E. Dunglas, 'Contribution à l'Histoire du Moyen-Dahomey', t. II, *Etudes Dahoméennes*, xx (1958), 57.

<sup>98</sup> Johnson, *History*, 202, 263, 288.

<sup>99</sup> Clapperton, *Journal*, 28, 56.

<sup>100</sup> R. and J. Lander, *Journal*, I, 190.

<sup>101</sup> Atiba, who became the first Alafin at the new capital, had been a pioneer of the use of firearms in the 1830s; cf. Johnson, *History*, 260, 266. The replacement of cavalry by musketeers in Oyo might be connected, following Goody, with the increased military importance of the palace slaves in the nineteenth century.

<sup>102</sup> Ajayi, 'The aftermath of the fall of Old Oyo', 147.

<sup>103</sup> Ajayi, *ibid.* suggests that the embargo was imposed by Ilorin. An alternative view would blame the Nupe and Borgu: I. A. Akinjogbin, 'The Prelude to the Yoruba Civil Wars of the Nineteenth Century', *Odu*, I, 2 (1965), 30; Smith, *Kingdoms*, 137.

wars of the Oyo kingdom had disrupted trade routes in the area, and led to a diversion of the Atlantic slave trade to new routes outside Oyo control. At any rate, it is clear that by the 1820s Oyo was participating only marginally in the supply of slaves to the coast: Clapperton was struck by the paucity of imported European goods in the Oyo kingdom, in contrast to their abundance in neighbouring Borgu.<sup>104</sup> In these circumstances, the Oyo could no longer import large numbers of horses, since it was with re-exported European goods that horses had to be purchased. The decline of cavalry in Oyo thus illustrates the fragility of the economic basis of military power in a cavalry state wholly dependent on foreign trade for its supplies of horses.

#### SUMMARY

Following an earlier article in this *Journal*, by Humphrey Fisher, dealing with the role of the horse in the Central Sudan, this article considers the role of cavalry in the kingdom of Oyo. It is suggested that the use of cavalry may have been adopted by Oyo during the sixteenth century. Oyo never became self-sufficient in horses, but remained dependent for its horses upon importation from the Central Sudan, while local mortality from trypanosomiasis was considerable. Evidence relating to the operations of Oyo armies supports the view that cavalry was of substantial military value, while at the same time illustrating the limitations of the military efficacy of cavalry. The acquisition and maintenance of large numbers of horses represented a considerable economic burden for Oyo, and the high cost of maintaining a large cavalry force may have inhibited the establishment of a royal autocracy in Oyo. The decline of the cavalry strength of Oyo in the early nineteenth century was due, it is suggested, to economic difficulties.

<sup>104</sup> Clapperton, *Journal*, 68. For the connexion of this development with the civil wars in Oyo, cf. *ibid.* 93.